

Blue Humanities

Ursula Kluwick

Introduction

The blue humanities is a subfield of the environmental humanities that derives from the belated recognition of the predominantly terrestrial focus of ecocriticism from its inception and well into the first decade of the twenty-first century. This narrow focus has come under pressure from a variety of directions (cf. ► [Elemental Ecocriticism](#)). Scholars interested in water insist that the self-perception of ecocriticism as *green* criticism reveals a major blind spot within the field. As blue critics have repeatedly pointed out, this blind spot covers more than two thirds of the surface of the earth, and in ignoring water, the environmental humanities have unduly privileged specific forms of nature at the expense of others. Human history, however, is intricately connected with the sea and other bodies of water, as sources of food and energy, as means of traffic, transport, and trade, as routes enabling exploration, contact, conflict, colonial expansion, and globalisation, as links and obstacles between different shores. The role water, particularly the sea, has played and continues to play for human history, and humans for the history of the sea, served as a starting point

for maritime criticism and its later blue humanities branch.

As anthropologist Veronica Strang points out, the “flow of water through every organism on Earth is not just physical. Water also permeates our emotions and imaginations, [...] religious beliefs as well as political, economic and social practices. It is literally essential to every aspect of life, and it always has been” (2015, pp. 7–8). This is reflected in the role water plays in the cultural imaginary. From the beginnings of recorded literature, water has featured prominently in literary and religious texts, such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the *Odyssey*, the Bible, and vedic literature. The symbolic richness of water in all its aggregates has long been recognized. One of the most significant innovations of the blue humanities in this context is its insistence that this symbolic function needs to be brought into conversation with the materiality of water. In Hester Blum’s succinct phrase, “[t]he sea is not a metaphor” (2010, p. 670). Instead, the blue humanities draws attention to the role of the world ocean as an arena of experience, cultural and social interaction, as a contact zone between the human and the more-than-human world, and as a material, voluminous body only partly accessible to human knowledge. From aboard ship, from the shore, and in the satellite images shot from space which have given us a visual impression of the earth as a blue marble, water appears as a surface, but these vantage points disguise its depth and its three-dimensional materiality (Steinberg and

U. Kluwick (✉)

Faculty of Linguistics and Literary Studies, University of Bremen, Bremen, Germany
e-mail: ukluwick@uni-bremen.de

Peters 2015; Dobrin 2021). As Steve Mentz emphasizes in an early agenda-setting article: “This new maritime perspective does not view the oceans simply as bodies to be crossed, but as subjects in themselves” (2009, p. 997).

By emphasizing the fluid, dynamic nature of bodies of water, the blue humanities challenges concepts of water as a passive resource and recipient of human agency. Instead, blue humanities scholars foreground what Hannah Boast calls “the co-constitutive relationship between water and society”, arguing that rather than existing as two “independent” entities, water and society “are created through their interaction” (2020, p. 19). As such, blue humanities thinking about water is a more radical form of arguments already put forth in 1988 by German cultural theorist Hartmut Böhme, who saw the mythopoetic history of water as evidence of humans’ principal connection with the water cycle, from which they cannot extract themselves. In their engagement with water, Böhme contends, humans are always objects as well as subjects, agents and acted-upon (1988, p. 16: *Handelnde* and *Betroffene*), and this also illustrates that as beings that act within and upon nature, humans are always also a part of nature. Water is especially well suited to demonstrating this as human bodies mainly consist of water. For hydro-feminist Astrida Neimanis, the fact that “*we are bodies of water*” shows that humans and their “wet constitution” are “inseparable from [...] ecological questions” (2017, p. 1; original emphasis). This emphasis on intimate and localized embodied experience as a direct conduit to global phenomena and geographically far-removed areas and events is characteristic of the blue humanities and the epistemic shift it seeks to initiate, since it is precisely the dynamic and mobile nature of water that enables such connections. Methodologically, blue scholarship, like most environmental humanities scholarship, promotes the transfer of scientific knowledge into the humanities; the critical reflection of scientific methods; the expansion of the episteme to include non-Western knowledges (DeLoughrey 2007; Ingersoll 2016); an emphasis on affective relations, everyday practices and auto-ethnography (Ingersoll 2016); and the inclusion of art and

literature as practices that generate both knowledge and affect (Hessler 2018; cf. ► [Affective Ecocriticism](#)).

Genealogy: Beginnings at Sea

The blue humanities takes its name from a programmatic article by Steve Mentz, who originally proposed a move “towards a blue cultural studies” (2009). However, the eventual expansion from a narrow cultural studies or literary perspective towards a broader disciplinary horizon is signalled by the eventual adoption of the label ‘blue humanities’. This is apt, as this new field has strong roots in the discipline of history and its turn to maritime history in the last decades of the twentieth century (Abulafia 1977; Horden and Purcell 2000) and is firmly inter- and multi-disciplinary, building on important contributions from, for instance, anthropology, art history, geography, history, philosophy, and sociology as well as on cultural and literary studies.

In the field of anglophone literary and cultural studies, on which this chapter focuses, a more explicit interest in maritime studies begins to take shape with two collections edited by Bernhard Klein, both dealing with the sea in British literature and history (2002; Klein and Mackenthun 2004). Both foreground the importance of the sea for British identity, culture, and literature and are shaped by interest in the ocean as a region with histories, cultural values, and political meanings. This coincides with the early agenda of the blue humanities, which draws attention to how deeply human history has been shaped by maritime as well as terrestrial events and experiences, but the role of the materiality of the ocean as a body of water that is key to blue humanities thinking is left aside. It also indicates the interdisciplinary orientation of this movement from the start.

This materialist perspective is more prominent in other early works. These include Steve Mentz’s agenda-setting article of 2009, as well as several other key publications that appeared around this time, documenting the wide resonance of a focus on water across and beyond literary studies and

showing that the aquatic turn had a broad multidisciplinary basis. Among these groundbreaking early studies is the cluster on Oceanic Studies in *PMLA* (2010), edited by Patricia Yaeger. In line with the general trajectory of the early blue turn, this cluster is exclusively devoted to the oceans, but in other respects, it already suggests the diversity of later phases: geographical (with a focus on specific seas, such as the Indian Ocean, the Pacific, and the Atlantic), thematic (by foregrounding diverse topics such as sea power, waste, and maritime modernity), and material (by taking into account both liquid and frozen seawater). The late 2000s and early 2010s also saw the publication of major contributions, such as historian John R. Gillis's *The Human Shore* (2012), anthropologist John Mack's *The Sea* (2011), as well as literary and cultural studies scholars Elizabeth DeLoughrey's *Routes and Roots* (2007), Axel Goodbody and Berbeli Wanning's *Wasser – Kultur – Ökologie* (2008), Margaret Cohen's *The Novel and the Sea* (2010), and Dan Brayton's *Shakespeare's Ocean* (2012).

These publications already document the capacity of the maritime turn to stimulate changes of perspective. Gillis and Mack stress the importance of the sea and shore for human history and culture, respectively. DeLoughrey draws on Kamau Brathwaite's *tidalectics* to bring island epistemologies to bear on literary history. Cohen proposes a new history of the novel, based on maritime connections and events. And Brayton explores the function of the sea in Shakespeare, and the role of Shakespeare for our conception of the ocean. Importantly, these studies focus on the histories of distinct bodies of water and the cross-cultural conversations emerging in these contexts, demonstrating that while blue humanities scholars engage with the global ocean (Brayton 2012), a major focus lies, from the start, on how maritime travel brings about contact and enables dialogue between different epistemologies (cf. Ingersoll 2016). This is a key intervention of the blue humanities: it makes visible indigenous "seascape epistemologies" (Ingersoll 2016) and knowledges of water, as well as colonialism as a form of control of water ("hydrocolonialism", Hofmeyr 2022) and questions of environmental justice

(cf. ► [Environmental Justice](#); cf. ► [Indigenuity](#); cf. ► [Postcolonial Ecocriticism](#)).

International Perspectives

The studies listed here serve as a transition between earlier and later phases of the blue humanities; however, not all their authors would identify with the label 'blue humanities'. At the inception of the oceanic turn, several possible names for this emerging field circulated, some of which are still in use today, particularly in Anglo-American academia. These include *new thalassology* (Horden and Purcell 2000), *oceanic studies* (Blum 2010), *terraqueous ecocriticism* (Brayton 2012), *critical ocean studies* (DeLoughrey 2017), *hydro-criticism* (Winkiel 2019), and *blue ecocriticism* (Dobrin 2021). While anglophone blue humanities research for a long time focused on oceans and islands, German-language water-related research originally identified as *Kulturgeschichte des Wassers* (Böhme 1988). As a result, the latter has been characterized by a broader concept of water, including fresh water and specific aquatic objects and phenomena (fountains, floods, etc.; the most recent example is Borgards et al. 2025). Important influences from beyond anglophone academia also include Gaston Bachelard's early phenomenological study *L'eau et les rêves* (1942). In Scandinavian and Nordic studies, blue humanities research focuses on the sea but also on specific regions, such as the Arctic or the Wadden Sea (Ritson 2019). The rest of this chapter focuses on the extension of the blue turn beyond the ocean and discusses aspects of particular relevance to the current state of the blue humanities: interdisciplinarity, the influence of new materialism, a more inclusive concept of water beyond saltwater, and a turn to aquatic aggregates.

Interdisciplinarity and New Materialism

As Stacy Alaimo points out, the blue humanities is fundamentally interdisciplinary. She sees this as an epistemological necessity, "since most aquatic

zones, species, and topics exist beyond human domains, requiring the mediation of science and technology” (Alaimo 2019, p. 429). The blue humanities is interested in bodies of water and in water as a substance with specific physical properties, and this conditions its engagement with the sciences. Alaimo’s own work is a prime example of this tendency, but interdisciplinarity is a basic feature of most blue humanities scholarship, with scholars drawing on oceanography, technology studies, feminist science studies, art and art history, media studies, geography, biology, history of science, and limnology (cf., for instance, Alaimo’s special issue on “Science Studies in the Blue Humanities” in *Configurations* 2019). Stefanie Hessler and the contributors to her collection *Tidalectics* (2018) explore how different disciplines imagine the ocean and what worldviews might evolve from this maritime imagination, and Stefan Helmreich brings together anthropology and oceanography, for instance in his work on waves (2023). Increasingly, hydrocritics also work on the intersection with the Energy Humanities (cf. ► [Energy Humanities](#); cf. ► [Extraction](#)).

One concept that deserves special mention for its interdisciplinary impact is *wet ontology*, coined by political geographer Philip Steinberg and human geographer Kimberley Peters in 2015. Wet ontology is an attempt to rethink space through water. It highlights the complexity, dynamics, and volume of the ocean “as a space of churning, where [...] place is provisional and forever being (re)produced” (Steinberg and Peters 2015, p. 258). Water is intrinsically mobile, and it is “simultaneously encountered as a depth and as a surface” (Steinberg and Peters 2015, p. 252). As Steinberg and Peters show, a concept of space remodelled in accordance with the characteristics of water can challenge terrestrial notions of space and territory and, by extension, the nation-state.

Another key tenet of the blue humanities throughout has been its insistence that water should be understood as a substance. While initially, this meant that attention was given to water in the form of concrete bodies, such as the sea, emphasis on water as a substance with specific physicochemical characteristics (H₂O) has become progressively more important. This is related to the impact of new materialism, one of the most important

conceptual and methodological influences on the blue humanities. Again, the work of Stacy Alaimo, herself a prominent new materialist, has been path-breaking in this respect, as has been Astrida Neimanis’s posthuman feminist conceptualization of “bodies of water” (2017). Neimanis foregrounds “interpermeation” (2017, p. 95) and is interested in how “water connects bodies – across times and spaces, through various complex movements and cycles to other bodies and beings in diverse exchanges” (2017, p. 94). Against visions of bodies as discrete, she holds that “water is in fact digging stealth channels through us all” (2017, p. 95). This focus on water as something that flows, trickles, and seeps into bodies, establishing unexpected and often unsuspected links between them, has provided a new impetus for blue humanities scholars to focus on the material entanglement of human and more-than-human aquatic bodies. Moreover, it indicates a fundamental rethinking of the subject matter of the blue humanities (cf. ► [Material Ecocriticism](#); cf. ► [Posthumanism](#)).

More than Saltwater, and More-than-Liquid Water

Arguably the most important recent shift in the blue humanities has been its turning away from an exclusive consideration of the sea and the extension of its focus from saltwater to a more inclusive view of water, encompassing fresh water and water as such. While lakes, rivers, and other bodies of water have long been subjects of literary and cultural research, this shift, combined with a new materialist conception of water as agentic matter allows an entirely different aquatic scale to come into view, as opposed to the massive bodies of water comprised by the global ocean. Blue humanities research now also engages with rivers and lakes (Oppermann 2023), puddles, artificially contained water (pipes, buckets, bottles), or even single drops, and this shift has also led to a different awareness of human-aqueous enmeshments. This has, in turn, further broadened the subject matter of the blue humanities towards aquatic matter such as breast milk, sewage, or urine (Neimanis 2017; Kluwick 2024) and a focus on how water permeates the world.

This move beyond the sea, finally, has also been accompanied by a growing realization of the transformability of water as a substance. The chemical compound H_2O exists in many physical states, depending on variables such as pressure and temperature. Most laypersons would automatically associate water with a liquid, but this is only one of the many phases of H_2O . Water is also solid (ice, snow) and gaseous (vapour, steam, fog, clouds) and scholars from different disciplines have increasingly argued that these phases need to be taken into account. Steinberg and Peters have re-conceptualized wet ontology as a “more-than-wet ontology” (2019, p. 293), Mentz argues for a “multi-phase blue humanities” (2021, p. 193), and Ursula Kluwick highlights the role of water as a “metamorphic substance” (2019, p. 245). Thinking water as mobile matter that moves through cycles of transformation, across time and space, and through human and more-than-human bodies, carrying with it human and other matter and intermingling with its surroundings, again widens its significance for the Environmental Humanities. It highlights the myriad forms of its entanglement with other bodies and points to the urgency of engagements with water. As Steinberg and Peters observe: “This larger ocean-world, or Hypersea, shapes and is shaped not just by our perceptions of water, but by the ways in which the hydrosphere extends outward, far beyond the geographic or material limits of the liquid ocean. And it traces the Hypersea as it extends inward, to our very being” (Steinberg and Peters 2019, p. 305). For the blue humanities, then, water forms an essential bridge between people and their environments, a shared substance that permeates the world as it moves along its more-than-liquid cycle through the human and more-than-human matter within it.

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Ursula Kluwick is Professor of English Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of Bremen, Germany. Among her main research interests within British and Anglophone literatures and cultures are the environmental and the blue humanities, nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century literature, postcolonial studies, as well as non-realist forms of writing. Her books include *Exploring Magic Realism in Salman Rushdie's Fiction* (Routledge 2011), *The Beach in Anglophone Literatures and Cultures* (ed. with Virginia Richter, Ashgate 2015), *Nachhaltigkeit interdisziplinär* (ed. with Evi Zemanek, UTB 2019), and *Haunting Ecologies: Victorian Conceptions of Water* (University of Virginia Press 2024). She is currently writing a monograph on the Mediterranean beach.

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